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RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNDP AND EU LAUNCH SWEEPING HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

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¶1. (SBU) On October 2, the Turkmen government's Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) hosted the opening ceremony for the joint EU, UNDP and UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) project "Strengthening the national capacity of Turkmenistan to promote and protect human rights" (the "Project"). In her opening remarks, IDHR Director Shirin Akhmedova noted that the Project's inception dates back to the visit by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour to Turkmenistan in 2007, at which time it was agreed, together with UNDP, to develop a program of technical assistance in the area of human rights. According to Akhmedova, that moment was a new chapter in Turkmenistan's development with a new president and government, and a commitment to implement all provisions of the international conventions it had joined. The Project is a continuation of a previous project, begun in 2006, to strengthen Turkmenistan's capacity to submit reports on compliance to international treaty bodies. Akhmedova highlighted the Turkmen government's "concrete steps" during the past two and a half years to protect human rights, mentioning: President Berdimuhamedov's affirmations of Turkmenistan's commitment to respecting human rights at the 62nd and 64th UN General Assemblies; legislative reforms adopted by the parliament and the government; the creation of new mechanisms to protect human rights, such as a commission to consider citizen complaints against law enforcement officials and an inter-agency commission on human rights, as well as a constitutional reform commission; establishment of a permanent dialogue with the OHCHR; practical steps by the government to report to treaty bodies; and undertaking a wide-range of capacity building human rights projects to increase knowledge within government agencies about human rights standards and to create a permanent dialogue with international organizations. Akhmedova expressed the hope that the Project will involve not only civil servants, but also civil society and the Turkmen public, and that it will assist the government to further develop democracy and human rights.

¶2. (SBU) EuropeAid's Director for Asia and Central Asia Dirk Meganck remarked that it was the first such project for the

EU in Turkmenistan and that it coincided with the EU-Turkmenistan human rights dialogue, especially in the areas of media freedom, civil society development, freedom of movement, freedom of religion and prison conditions. Meganck suggested that the project would allow practical implementation of aspects of the human rights dialogue, in particular to improve the government's capacity to comply with international human rights standards and to develop a national human rights strategy at all levels of government and society. He emphasized that the development of civil society would continue to be an important element of their human rights dialogue. OHCHR Europe and Central Asia Section Chief Margaret Nicholson also mentioned the 2007 visit of Louise Arbour as the impetus for the Project. She hoped the project would create real changes for the people of Turkmenistan related to UN recommendations on human rights matters. Her expectations for the project included the development of civil society and creation of democratic open space; a balance between branches of government, especially in the area of criminal justice; and the creation of independent human rights institutions. In a positive way, Nicholson recognized that Turkmenistan is a party to a significant number of human rights conventions, participated in the UN Universal Periodic Review process, and hosted a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Religion. She urged the Turkmen government to facilitate more such visits, especially by those rapporteurs who have expressed an interest in visiting Turkmenistan.

13. (SBU) The Project has a three-year duration with a total budget of USD 3,235,000. Its dual objectives are to improve the Turkmen government's capacity to comply with international human rights standards and to improve the

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knowledge and capacity of all rights holders to claim their rights. As such, the Project seeks to accomplish four main results: Increase human rights awareness within the government through workshops, translation of materials, and study trips; Establish institutional capacity for reporting to treaty bodies through workshops, training exchanges for IDHR employees, and creation of human rights database; Improve human rights awareness in judicial and penitentiary systems through training; and Provide better public access to human rights information through mass media campaigns, dissemination of information materials, curriculum input for secondary schools, and opening of human rights outreach resource centers in each province.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: This human rights project is both much needed and very ambitious. Project activities and objectives as outlined break some new ground, especially by providing the public with tools to learn about and stand up for its rights. Still, results will depend on the willingness of officials and ministries to engage and contribute to effective implementation, a factor that is beyond the control of the IDHR, the GOTX's implementing partner, alone. Likewise, IDHR might have its own capacity problems as it juggles this project with its lead role on many other reform initiatives, both internally and with other foreign donors. No doubt the EU will carefully monitor implementation in the context of its human rights dialogue with Turkmenistan, which could generate the political will and momentum necessary for real progress. END COMMENT.  
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